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EFFECTIVE UTILIZATION OF STATE FACILITIES FOR PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE

By JEROME D. SCHEIN, Ph.D., Director, Deafness Research & Training Center, New York University

The preparation of professionally qualified personnel requires first-hand experience in the tasks to be performed. Whether they refer to it as an externship, internship or a practicum, those responsible for training agree that it is essential. So that you will know the context from which these comments arise, I would first like to describe the New York University educational model.

The Deafness Research and Training Center does not itself offer any degrees or teach any courses in the standard curriculum. Those matters properly belong to the academic departments of the university. What the Deafness Center does do is:

- (a) identifies disciplines in need of professionals to work with deaf persons;
- (b) recruits students to enter degree programs in preparation for these professions;
- (c) administers the training grants awarded to students;
- (d) develops and staffs courses on deafness to supplement the disciplinary studies and to assure that the student will be prepared to serve deaf clients;
- (e) arranges, and in many cases supervises, the practicum;
- (f) maintains extracurricular opportunities for students in the related degree programs to improve their knowledge of and skills in working with deaf people.

Thus, a student desiring a degree in any field offered by New York University – and that includes most professions – could combine his degree preparation with a specialization in deafness. This educational model provides maximum flexibility to the Center and a high return per dollar invested by the Social and Rehabilitation Service.

Lest this very brief description of the academic setting in which the Deafness Center operates within New York University mislead you, let me add another word or two. I said that the Center offers no degrees. Naturally

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not. That is the role of the academic department. Were we to offer a degree, it would have to be in our specialty, deafness. That would be a little odd: Doctor of Deafness! More importantly, we might be short-changing the deaf community. Our graduates are now fully qualified in their disciplines. Not persons highly knowledgeable about deafness and poorly trained in their discipline. To illustrate, we presently have 37 active candidates for master's and doctor's degrees in 11 different areas, excluding teachers of deaf children: rehabilitation counseling, special education, counselor education, school psychology, speech pathology and audiology, educational theatre, communications, educational sociology, communication in education, clinical psychology, and social work.

Each of the degree candidates has been accepted by the major department, without regard to the fact that the student wishes to apply his studies to helping deaf people. He is, therefore, the potential equal of anyone entering his profession. Of course, the reason New York University has so many courses on deafness is due to the Center. But all of the courses are part of some department's curriculum. They are evaluated along with all other courses at New York University.

With that background, you can see that we do not approach the question of how to work most effectively with State facilities in any single way. For some programs our staff is asked to not only arrange a suitable practicum but also to supervise it. For others we only consult with the faculty, offering occasional suggestions. The variations in practicum arrangements are almost as numerous as the disciplines.

When we talk about involving State facilities in the practicum, we need to ask what the State can expect from the partnership. The question arises, because the State makes an investment. A practicum is not worthy of the name, if the student is only given work to do. He must have active supervision, extensive feedback; in short, the practicum must be a learning experience. The State, therefore, must give up some of the time of its most capable staff. The State will do this in return for the invigoration the staff gets from the trainee. The trainee brings in fresh ideas – not all good, but fresh nonetheless. And, of course, the trainees do a little work in time. Eventually, near the end of the practicum period, the trainees should be carrying on their duties with less and less need for correction, though the need for feedback continues to the last day.

The training facility gains more than a parking place for its students when it works with the State agencies. First of all, it gets immediate information on the effectiveness of prepracticum instruction. Secondly, State agencies are “where much of the action is at.” The variety of cases is great and the volume is heavy. An alert training facility will get numerous ideas for research from close contacts with the State agencies.

The students, of course, profit from a lively experience. They are on the firing line. We have also found a number of our students continuing with their practicum facility after graduation. The training period in the agency

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was a sort of "trial marriage." Not unimportantly, students have discovered places they did not want to work. Better to learn that before taking a position than afterward.

What I have been saying is only true if a real partnership develops between the university and the State agencies. Feedback is useless if no one is listening. It will not be there if no one is talking. The training facility must offer the State agencies genuine participation in curriculum planning and execution. When all parties are convinced of the worthwhileness of such a partnership, then the outcome is almost assured: an exciting, relevant and productive training program.

There is another party to the partnership, one that should not be overlooked. When graduates are leaving programs well prepared and well motivated, the deaf community benefits. Effective training liaisons mean improved services for deaf clients. And that, after all, is what the training is all about.